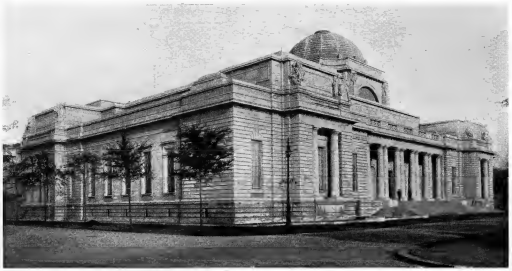
# The National Museum of Wales.

By W. S. Purchon.

*Member of the Museum Building Committee.*



A GENERAL VIEW OF THE ENTRANCE FRONT.

THE problem of designing a National Museum to occupy the site at the south-east corner of Cathays Park, Cardiff, was one of great difficulty. To what extent should this new building follow the architectural treatment of the adjoining ones? In what manner could it indicate not only its serious educational purpose, but the important fact that it is a national, and not a civic or county, building? The problem was by no means simplified by the nature of the existing buildings.

Faced with the alternative of designing a National Museum on a vacant site in Bloomsbury, or a similar building adjoining Messrs. Lanchester and Rickards's brilliant City Hall, the average architect would vote every time for Bloomsbury.

There was, however, and fortunately so, no alternative site, and it speaks well for the virility and the sporting instincts of the architectural profession—to say nothing of its amazing generosity—that one hundred and thirty designs were submitted in open competition for the new Museum. The assessors, Sir Aston Webb, Sir J. J. Burnett, and Mr. E. T. Hall, awarded the first place to Messrs. Smith and Brewer, and the task of carrying out the building was entrusted to this firm.

A study of the complete scheme, and of the portions of the building already completed, makes it abundantly clear that the work was placed in exceedingly able hands. One point should be emphasized at the beginning of any critical essay on the building, and that is that in the architectural treatment exactly the right note has been struck, and as has already been indicated, on the particular site in question this is a matter of especial importance. The National Museum of Wales is clearly a museum and a national monument, and whether seen in the morning with a strong light on its main, south-eastern façade, in the evening with the setting sun gilding its uncompleted dome, or in the dusk with a flood of light in the portico, throwing the colonnade into bold relief, the new building impresses one with its rare and haunting beauty.

Work on the building was commenced in 1910, and on 26 June 1912 His Majesty King George V was graciously pleased to signify his interest in the Museum by laying the foundation stone. Work continued, though much interrupted, until 1917, when building operations ceased, not to be resumed again until the autumn of 1919.

The site is about $4\frac{1}{4}$ acres in extent, and the available space, which tapers towards the main front, has been used with great ability. The triangular space on the east side, caused by the irregular shape of the site, is to be well used by a lecture theatre in the form of a great semicircular apse in the centre of the length of the building, and by a fine open-air theatre arranged at the north-east corner. It is intended to construct this open-air theatre entirely of stone, and to use it primarily for Welsh National folk songs, dances, etc.

The main feature of the plan is a large interior court, 307 ft. long by 134 ft. wide, in which are placed the two one-story pavilions for Welsh National history and history and antiquities, and the central garden and fountain. The central garden not only provides a possibility of temporary escape from the galleries to the open air, which may do much to minimize the effects of "museum headache," but also provides a restful and pleasant aspect for the galleries surrounding it. It was therefore decided to group the public galleries on two floors round this central court, which is of such extent that it provides ample light. Uninterrupted circulation is complete on each floor, while on the ground-floor level the central court can be crossed at four different points, thus minimizing the chief disadvantages of the courtyard plan. Passenger lifts will be provided to run from the basement to the second floor.

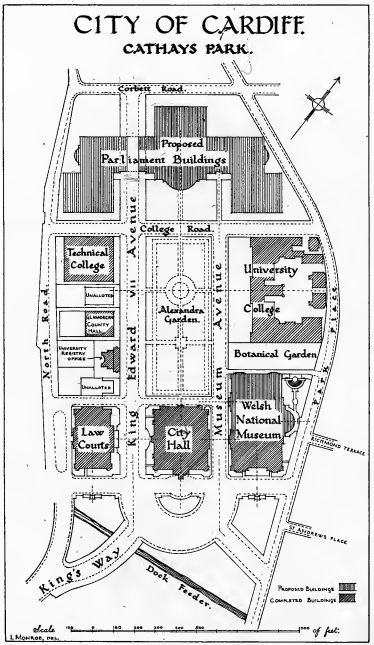
Surrounding and outside the public galleries is the space for the reserve collections, the various divisions of which

will, in each case, be adjacent to, and assemble from, the public galleries of the same department. A mezzanine floor is inserted between the ground and first floors of the reserve, and the extra accommodation thus obtained is apportioned between the departments on the two main floors. Pass doors will be provided between the various departments, and the different floors connected at frequent intervals by staff staircases continued down to the basement. A workroom, research room, and keeper's room will be provided for each of the main departments of the Museum.

The chief alteration in the design from that submitted in the competition has been the raising of the height of the entrance hall by carrying the whole of it up two floors, while the central portion is open to the top of the dome. This has necessitated an extra floor being arranged round the dome to contain the committee room, library, and the director's offices, all of which were displaced by the enlargement of the entrance hall.

The entrance hall is a noble apartment with Ionic columns of Mazzano marble and floor of Comblanchien marble and Belgian black, while the fine stair at each end is of Comblanchien. This hall and the main stairs, together with two fine rooms to the west and east, intended respectively for a children's museum and a refreshment room, occupy the south front, while immediately opposite the entrance is to be the Welsh National History Pavilion, designed for the display of habitat groups in alcoves receiving their light from high windows over the surrounding aisle invisible to the spectator. At the north end of the central court a similar pavilion for history and antiquities will be arranged, while the aquarium will be placed in the basement under the fountain in the central garden, approached by stairs from the pavilions previously mentioned. The lecture theatre in the centre of the eastern side will be provided with separate entrances, exits, and cloak-rooms.

On the first floor the collections of art, botany, and zoology will ultimately be arranged, the sculpture gallery being a wide room with alcoves down each side and lit by high lights in the opposite side of the room, while the semi-circular gallery over the lecture theatre can be used either for reserve or for the public. The small galleries on the main front would ultimately be particularly suitable for loan or temporary exhibitions; they are approached from the main galleries by interesting bridges in front of the main stairs.



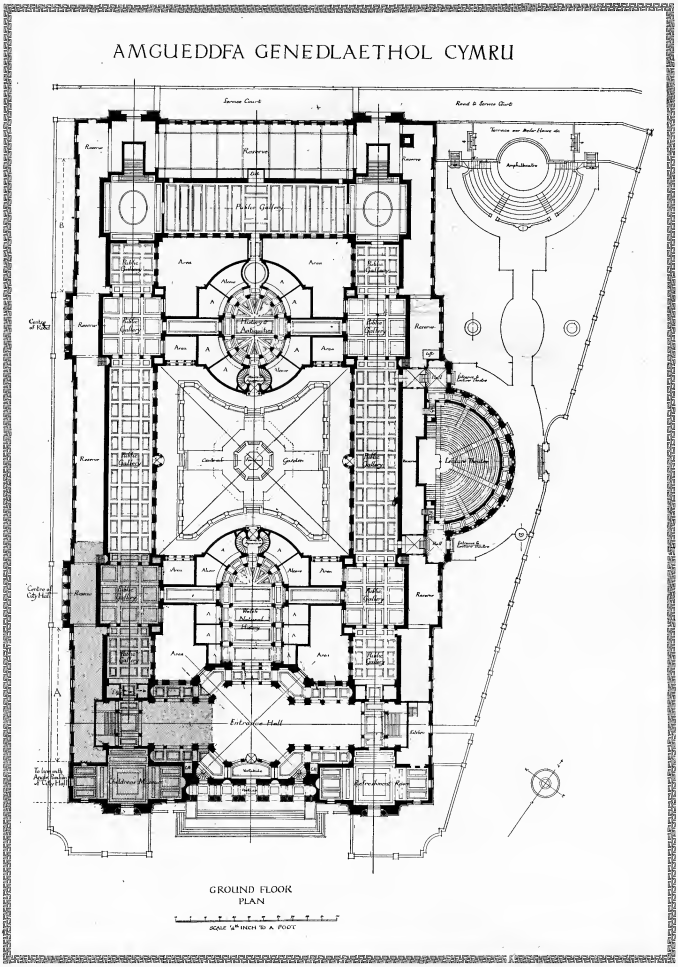

LAY-OUT OF CATHAYS PARK.

To the north of the Museum a service court is to be provided with roadway connections to Museum Avenue and Park Place. Adjoining this service court will be the unpacking rooms, workshops, and service lifts. Cloak-rooms and lavatories for the public are placed in the basement, with bicycle stores on each side of the main entrance.

Much thought has been given to the subject of heating and ventilation, and as a result a combined system of inlet and extract ventilation has been adopted, the fresh air being admitted through water screens in the basement and then forced by electric fans through ducts leading to the various rooms. The vitiated air is similarly drawn from the rooms through ducts leading to the extract fans and thence discharged through main extract shafts leading to the top of the building. In cold weather the fresh air is warmed by passing over steam-heated batteries. There will be no fireplaces, and the only chimney is the shaft from the boiler-house. In order to carry out the system effectively it was decided to construct a sub-basement to contain the engineering plant, pipes, and the great ventilating trunks which carry the air to and from the vertical ducts in the walls.

The southern front of the Museum is in line with the City Hall and Law Courts, and the three buildings form a magnificent group. The upper part of the Museum still requires finishing touches—notably the dome, which it is hoped will shortly be covered with lead—otherwise the southern front is practically complete. The hoarding has been removed, and kerbs and lawn provided round the building, so that the general effect of the main front of the Cathays Park group can now be realized more fully, and very impressive it is.

In the original perspective, projecting bays, somewhat similar in outline to those of the City Hall, were used at the ends of the southern façade. These were abandoned at a later stage, and beyond the fact that the heights of the plinth, cornice, and parapet of the City Hall and Law Courts have been followed, no attempt was made in the final scheme for the Museum, and wisely so, to approximate more closely to their designs. In the early perspective, again, single columns were used in the entrance portico in the centre of the south front. This is now ably treated with a coupled Doric Order, the capital being Greek rather than Roman,




THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF WALES: GROUND FLOOR PLAN.

*Photo: J. A. Hallam.*

A VIEW FROM THE CITY HALL.

and having the start of flutes immediately below it, over otherwise unfluted shafts with bases of Roman type. There is no frieze, but a deep architrave, plain over the columns, and treated with fascias over the walling; while the cornice, which is perhaps slightly shallow, has modillions. The main entrance, under the portico, with its fine bronze doors and granite surround, is particularly noteworthy. Over the central portico is the dominating dome (of greater height than originally shown) supported on a drum with finely panelled concave angles, and great semicircular windows in its main sides.

On each side of the portico is a pavilion rusticated with rebated joints and containing a central projecting window flanked with columns like those of the portico, and crowned with an attic enriched with sculpture.

The western front when completed will have two main pavilions somewhat similar to those on the southern front, but each containing three windows, with subsidiary rusticated pavilions at the angles. The eastern façade will be similar, but will contain the semicircular apse, to which reference has already been made, between its main pavilions. It will be noted that the windows on the western façade are treated with a metal transome, which is arranged at the sill level of the mezzanine floor of the reserve galleries.

The main pavilions on the southern façade and the one which is completed on the western front are crowned by fine groups of sculpture, two to each pavilion. On the southern front the western pair representing the Prehistoric and Classic periods respectively are by Gilbert Bayes, while the eastern groups, executed by Richard Garbe, represent the Mediæval and Modern periods. The two groups on the western façade, representing mining and shipping, are the work of Thomas J. Clapperton, and are remarkable for their extraordinarily high architectural quality. The lions and dragons buttressing the dome are by A. Bertram Pegram.

All the modelling was done by Joseph Armitage, except that for the bronze doors, which was by George Alexander, and the goats' heads over the main entrance by Harold Stabler.

It has been stated that the architectural note struck by the exterior is essentially right, and exactly the same is to be said for the interior. In the original conditions for the competition it was wisely laid down that "Internally the buildings should be finished in a simple and dignified way, free of ornamental or other detail likely to compete in interest with the exhibits." This condition has been adhered to carefully, and an austere, dignified beauty achieved by the excellence of proportions and skilful detailing. One is reminded of a comment on Hardy's poems, "Where else in poetry will one find so much beauty and so little ornament."

It may not be inappropriate to mention here certain of the exhibits which may be of interest to readers of this review. In the Geological Department there are, for instance, series of specimens illustrating the classification of rocks, and the principal kinds of rocks which occur in this country, together with special series of building and orna-

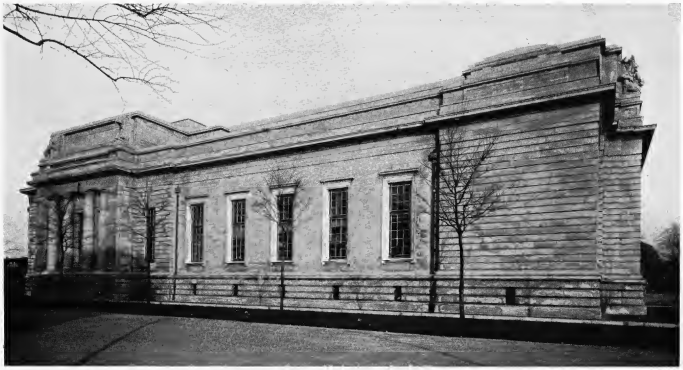
*Photo: J. A. Hailam.*

Plate III. February 1923.

## THE ENTRANCE, LOOKING TOWARDS THE CITY HALL.

Smith and Brewer, Architects.

*The National Museum of Wales in Cathays Park at Cardiff has just been opened to the public. It stands on one of the finest sites in Great Britain, flanking Lanchester and Rickards's famous City Hall, which can be seen in the background*



THE WEST FRONT.

SOUTH-WEST CORNER OF THE INTERNAL COURTYARD.

*Photo: Western Mail.*

THE ENTRANCE HALL.

STAIRCASE AND EXHIBITION GALLERY, GROUND FLOOR.

BRIDGE AND WATER-COLOUR ROOM ON THE FIRST FLOOR.

*The cases contain the Investiture Regalia of H.R.H. the Prince of Wales, and Sculpture by Sir W Goscombe John, R.A.*

Plate IV. February 1923.

THE ENTRANCE HALL.

*This view is taken looking towards the Main Staircase. The Sculpture in the foreground is the famous "Le Baiser" by Rodin.*

STAIR TO ADMINISTRATIVE SUITE.

BRIDGE ON FIRST FLOOR, LOOKING NORTH.

mental stones, particularly those which are in current use, and specimens illustrating the formation, character, and distribution of slate. A case illustrating the nature and use of asbestos is the first of a series intended to deal with minerals or rocks indirectly connected with building work.

The art section of the Museum contains the Menelaus collection of oil paintings—bequeathed to the Cardiff Corporation in 1882—together with a comprehensive collection of water-colour drawings representing the most notable painters of the English school, presented in 1898 by the trustees of the late J. Pyke Thompson, who have since added to this valuable gift several fine examples of oil paintings representing the English and French schools, many water-colour drawings, and a considerable number of fine prints in which the art of Méryon, the celebrated French etcher, predominates.

Since the establishment of the National Museum considerable attention has been directed towards the formation of a collection which shall adequately, if not completely, reflect the hitherto neglected achievements of deceased and living artists of Welsh birth and extraction, and this section is rapidly and fittingly becoming a feature of the art side of the Museum's activities. Therefore it is by no means surprising to find examples of the art of Richard Wilson, R.A., which are steadily increasing in number.

In the few excellent examples of sculpture which are exhibited the art of Sir W. Goscombe John, R.A., and the late Professor Havard Thomas—both Welshmen—is given prominence, while Rodin is well represented by the large "Le Baiser" which occupies the centre of the completed portion of the entrance hall, and the small bronze figure composition entitled "Illusions."

The ceramic section is the principal feature of the Industrial Arts exhibit by reason of the extent and complexity of the wonderful "De Winton" collection of Continental and English porcelain, to which is added the "Cardiff" collection illustrating the superb products of the long since extinct Welsh potteries which more than a century ago were carried on at Nantgarw and Swansea under the supervision of the now famous William Billingsley, that most romantic of potters, most elusive of porcelain painters, and probably the most ill-starred character in the whole history of British ceramic art.

A portion of the Museum has been completed, and members of the public have been admitted to it since Saturday, 28 October, 1922. Mr. A. Dunbar Smith, who, since the death of his partner, Cecil Brewer, has carried on the work alone, is to be congratulated on a fine achievement; and congratulations on the fact that their strenuous efforts are bearing such excellent fruit are also due to a body of local enthusiasts, and to those who first urged Parliament to grant to Wales this National Institution, amongst whom may be mentioned the first President, Sir Alfred Thomas (now the Right Hon. Lord Pontypridd, D.L.), the Right Hon. Lord Treowen, C.B., C.M.G., the late Mr. William Jones, M.P., Colonel Pryce-Jones, the Right Hon. Sir J. Herbert Lewis, and the late Mr. Tom Ellis, M.P.